THE WILD MAN WITHIN

PETER MATTHIESSEN'S BIGFOOT

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In September 1976, Peter Matthiessen took me aside at a family wedding in Seattle. He was forty-nine and at the acme of his ambidextrous literary powers. *Far Tortuga*, his finest novel, about a doomed voyage of turtle hunters, had been published the year before, and his next book, set in the Himalayas, would be *The Snow Leopard*, his finest work of nonfiction.

I had mentioned to Peter that my wife and I were headed for Vancouver, B.C., on a short vacation. Looking at me meaningfully, my uncle said that while we were in Vancouver we should go to a private screening of a film that he would arrange for us. The brief footage, he explained, showed a sasquatch or what was believed to be a sasquatch walking in the woods of northern California.

I was surprised, for I had no inkling of his interest in Sasquatch, aka Bigfoot: the large, hairy, hominoid creature reputed by some not very reputable people to lurk in the forests of the Northwest. Sensitive to scoffers, Peter had told almost no one about his fascination with Bigfoot. Indeed, he could have told me, but did not, that earlier in the summer, while driving in the backcountry investigating reports of Bigfoot, he'd seen a tall, bipedal figure run across the road and disappear into the trees.

I took my uncle's instruction without question. The night after arriving in Vancouver – fittingly a foggy night, rain streaking the lampposts on dark, unfamiliar streets – my wife and I took a taxi to an address in a modest residential neighborhood. A stocky, crewcut man in a plaid lumberjack shirt opened the door. He was René Dahinden, an experienced woodsman who had considerable stature within the variegated Bigfoot community. Constantly on call, he examined tracks and debriefed people who claimed to have seen the mysterious animal. The gimlet-eyed Dahinden was just the sort of expert to reassure Peter Matthiessen – experienced in the woods himself, an avid observer with zoological training, and nobody's fool – that his fascination with the creature was not misplaced.

Dahinden took us to a bright, plain room in his basement, where a projector and screen had been set up. He had recently acquired the famous footage shot by Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin, which remains the single best piece of evidence that sasquatches might be real. The 16-mm film was shot in 1967 near Bluff Creek, California, by two Bigfoot hunters. Representations of Bigfoot that are purveyed in the popular media today consciously or unconsciously mimic the tall, apelike figure captured by the shaky film. Sixty to eighty feet from the camera, the creature looks over its shoulder as it strides from left to right. Arms swinging, it crosses a sandbar in a creek bed and steps lightly over a clot of logs. Although the thing clearly is fleeing, its baleful look suggests that it is quite prepared to turn around.

My wife and I left Dahinden's house quietly, feeling confused. How could it not be a guy in a gorilla suit? I don't recall talking with Peter about the film clip. He and I never spoke of Bigfoot again; he must have sensed my skepticism. Occasionally I wondered about this quirky manifestation of his naturalist's curiosity, his Zen-tinged musing about sasquatches and their cousins the yeti. Wary to the end, Peter never published anything substantive about them, but he clearly intended to. He labored on a Bigfoot book on and off for some thirty years. It was the last work on his desk when he died, in 2014. When I review his richly rendered writing through the darkling lens of Sasquatch, nothing reads the same to me because the creature colored everything he believed about the natural world. Most of all he longed for Bigfoot to be true.

Peter Matthiessen's Bigfoot fancy took root in the mountains of Nepal in 1973. He had trekked to the snow-streaked scarp of the Tibetan plateau with the zoologist George Schaller. Schaller's purpose was to the study the rare bharal, the Himalayan blue sheep, and Matthiessen's was to salve his grief for the loss of his second wife, Deborah. Deborah, who had introduced him to Zen Buddhism, had died of cancer the previous winter. In *The Snow Leopard* the elusive, eponymous cat emerges as the symbol of Matthiessen's quest. He never succeeds in catching sight of a snow leopard. But rather than being disappointed, "Isn't that wonderful?" Matthiessen the Zen oblate writes.

A third creature has a small, persistent presence in the book: the yeti. Schaller, though he stipulates that "at least ninety-five percent of the yeti material is nonsense," examines a plaster cast of a track in Kathmandu and offers the opinion that yetis *could* exist, and might well. Matthiessen writes that the upright, reddish-and-black-haired yetis are familiar animals to Sherpa villagers, albeit fearsome to encounter, even though the yeti is dismissed in the West as "the abominable snowman." Matthiessen challenges the scientific skeptics: "But as with the sasquatch of the vast rain forests of the Pacific Northwest, the case *against* the existence of the yeti – entirely speculative, and necessarily based on the assumptions of foolishness or mendacity in many observers of good reputation – is even less 'scientific' than the evidence that it exists."

A few pages later, near a creek in a pregnantly shaded canyon, he sees a "dark shape" jump behind a boulder, "much too big for a red panda, too covert for a musk deer, too dark for wolf or leopard, and much quicker than a bear." He goes on, "With binoculars I stare for a long time at the mute boulder, feeling the presence of unknown life behind it, but all is still, there is only the sun and morning mountainside, the pouring water." All day he mulls over the incident. Reason tells him he probably glimpsed a musk deer. But "it is hard to put away the thought of yeti." Revisiting that thought in later years, Matthiessen would speak of his putative yeti sighting without ever mentioning his possible Bigfoot sighting.

Though Bigfoot and kindred creatures still roam late-night TV, the pursuit of them is not as serious as it once was. The 1970s were the prime time for Sasquatch, as well-funded investigators took up the hunt on the heels of the Patterson-Gimlin film. Reports of

sightings and plaster impressions of cartoonishly large tracks passed back and forth, along with not a little backbiting and rivalry among the sleuths. René Dahinden, for one, was scathing about the mistakes and hoaxes that bedeviled the field. Matthiessen, though still at work on *The Snow Leopard*, decided to stick his toe into the water. His practice was to fund a new project by way of a magazine assignment, usually for *The New Yorker*. He met with William Shawn, the magazine's editor. Though dubious, Shawn agreed to cover the expenses for Matthiessen's first reporting trip to the West.

In 1978 a symposium was held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver titled *Sasquatch and Related Phenomena.* Academics and journalists, as well as run-of-the-mill sasquatch buffs, attended. Matthiessen was there too, the most high-profile writer present, but if he was on assignment, he did not publish anything. He met Peter Byrne, the tweedy dean of the investigators, and the two began a correspondence. Now ninety-three, Byrne is still in the hunt. He recalls Matthiessen as very pleasant and courteous. "Peter expressed great interest in the possibility of their [sasquatches'] existence," he said. "I thought he'd go out into the bush and join the work. I thought he'd come out and write something. It's a pity he didn't." This was a typical misreading; Matthiessen was more ardent and committed than he let on, even within the Sasquatch fraternity.

The conference's official finding was that it was not possible to dismiss all the evidence of Bigfoot as a hoax. Since no carcasses or skeletons had turned up, and since the tracks and photos were inconclusive, there could not be positive findings. Still, as the scientists' maxim goes, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Even today, no proof having materialized, the agnostic Schaller will not say that Bigfoot and the yeti do not exist. He wrote to me: "Any large mammal leaves feces which DNA can identify to species and individual. So far searches have been brief and rather haphazard, not focused and determined over a period of at least months. So I hope the searches will continue."

In addition to his sporadic, private probes, Matthiessen collected books about the creatures. His Bigfoot shelf eventually held more than two dozen volumes, including a couple of books on paleontology. For it would become his argument, nodding to evo-

lutionary biology, that the sasquatches might be a relic species of hominoid. There were plenty of offshoot hominoids in the fossil record. Rare and skittish, the animals may have been able to hang on in remote areas of Asia and North America.

One of the books in his special collection was an anthology of essays titled *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism.* The essays explored primitivism in European culture and literature. Primitivism was embodied in the "wild man," who was both a myth and an anthropological entity. Ursine men – Linnaeus classified them as *Homo sapiens ferus* – were said to prowl the edges of civilization. Always living alone, they dressed in animal skins or straw and had a giant's strength and sexual potency. In pre-Freudian societies the wild man served a negative social function when he appeared in furry caricatures at folk festivals, reifying the repressed wants and forbidden behaviors of the town. But the discovery of *real* wild men in the Americas, fascinating to Europeans for their novelty and savagery, caused their mythical wild man to collapse, like Spenser's Orgoglio. A pale-skinned version was put on the stage as Caliban.

That was the thrust of the anthology, and it must have resonated with my uncle, who by the late 1970s had spent twenty years seeking wildness in New Guinea, the Amazon, East Africa, and other far-flung places. Increasingly he expressed anger and sadness that the wilderness was being chopped up, its animals exterminated, its native peoples abused. Until he journeyed to Nepal, the sasquatch and yeti were absent from Matthiessen's books, yet a predilection for something like Bigfoot – an unconquerable natural force or being – quivers like a compass needle seeking north.

The Tree Where Man Was Born, for instance, his 1972 book on East Africa, contains the best descriptive prose Matthiessen ever produced. Perfectly distilled adjectives offset the nobby nomenclature of the geography, peoples, animals, and plants. Matthiessen writes of the Masai people, Nuer, Dinka, Hadza, and so on, with an ethnographer's eye, but all the while he wistfully evokes the Dorobo. Mysterious hunter-gatherers, the Dorobo were said to live, if they were still extant, on the margins of the present tribal boundaries, even underground. The book concludes with a vision of the outcast Dorobo, a people he never meets.

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The Tree Where Man Was Born treats seriously the African legends – for example, of animals that are inhabited by human spirits, "cults of leopard-men and lion-men who kill with their claws." To Matthiessen the tales are not mere superstition: "These events have a reality in the ancestral intuition of mankind that cannot be dismissed simply because it cannot be explained." His favorite story is about a marauding hyena that, when finally it is killed, is found on the ground as a human corpse. The story is "mythic and rings true, whether or not it actually took place."

A shape-shifting wildness pervades his novels too. Here may be permitted a bit of psychologizing. Think of the vagabond Lewis Moon, the half-Cheyenne, half-white protagonist of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1966), who goes native in the Amazon, and Edgar Watson, the murderous tycoon of the swamps and principal character of Matthiessen's Florida novels, starting with *Killing Mr. Watson* (1990) and culminating with *Shadow Country* (2008). These two uninhibited men relying on their instincts are not Peter Matthiessen, but they are "natural men," the kind of individuals he admired.

In *Race Rock* (1954), Matthiessen's first novel (which he thought better forgotten), the symbolism is more explicit and the wild part is assigned to a character named Cady Shipman. Cady, short for Caleb (Caliban?), could have stepped out of the pages of Jack London. He's an ex-Marine who knows the ways of the striped bass and deer, fishes and shoots effortlessly, and harbors violent feelings, especially toward his overtly cultivated friends. The major female character, Evelyn (Eve) Murray, longs to be possessed by a natural man apart from her moneyed set: "She had imagined many times the scene of the act, it was always near the sea, in the wind and sand, and the possessor bore always – she had not realized this at first – an unmistakable likeness to Cady Shipman."

The wildness of Bigfoot seemed to crystallize Matthiessen's longings about himself. Matthiessen was dissatisfied with his affluent upbringing and the easy privileges of his education. He envied men living close to the earth. Zen Buddhism notwithstanding, his own interior nature was unbridled, and he sometimes feared it would run away with him. Simultaneously his heart went out to the natural world, which badly needed a champion. Although Matthiessen himself could not save a wild place or wild

people from destruction, Sasquatch might, through its spiritual power. The younger novelist Howard Norman was one of the few friends Matthiessen talked to about the significance of the creatures. When I asked Norman to tell me more, he replied, "I would need to take my time and write carefully to you. This subject, I think, needs to be dealt with carefully because Peter as you know thought about Yeti, etc., zoologically rather than as some sort of spiritual projection." Actually I think that Matthiessen toggled between the two themes, the spiritual and zoological, without resolving which might shape a book.

In the early 1980s Matthiessen's conception of Bigfoot was guided by a man named Craig Carpenter. Carpenter, who claimed Mohawk ancestry and had many contacts on Native American reservations, began to take Matthiessen around, introducing him to more traditionally inclined Indians. Among other things Carpenter was a curator of legends about Sasquatch. The term comes from the coastal peoples of the Northwest, but numerous other Western tribes have a Big Man figure in their traditions. Perhaps because his investigations in the Pacific forests had not borne fruit, Matthiessen sought a more measured, abstract sense of Bigfoot, a creature framed by Indian myths and also by occasional portentous sightings on native lands.

The indigenous communities in the West were going through a period of consciousness-raising and political ferment. Native pride was running high. The American Indian Movement (AIM), a group of activists, had had an armed standoff with the federal government at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. An AIM leader, Leonard Peltier, was convicted of murder after two FBI agents were killed in a shootout. Dropping the astringent, dispassionate voice of *Far Tortuga* and *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen wrote a series of magazine articles about white Americans' longstanding prejudice toward and outright swindling of Native Americans in their fragmented homeland. The dispatches were collected in a book, *Indian Country*, published in 1984 and dedicated to Carpenter. A more controversial book, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, which centered on the doings at Wounded Knee and the alleged "railroading" of Leonard Peltier, had been published the year before, but the tendentious, six-

hundred-page work was immediately pulled from bookstores because of libel litigation. Not until 1989, the libel cases having been dismissed by the Supreme Court, did *Crazy Horse* become available again.

What had all this to do with Bigfoot? Although Matthiessen had gone into Indian country looking for Sasquatch, once there he was exposed to grave injustices, which wrenched his writing in another direction. That the tail may have wagged the dog can be seen in the introduction to *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*. "My travels with Indians," Matthiessen explains, "began some years ago with the discovery that most traditional communities in North America know of a messenger who appears in evil times as a warning from the Creator that man's disrespect for his sacred instructions has upset the harmony and balance of existence; some say that the messenger comes in sign of a great destroying fire that will purify the world of the disruption and pollution of earth, air, water, and all living things. He has strong spirit powers and sometimes takes the form of a huge hairy man; in recent years this primordial being has appeared near Indian communities from the northern Plains to far northern Alberta and throughout the Pacific Northwest."

Matthiessen goes on to link Indians' sadness about their dispossession to stories of the Big Man's reappearances. In a meeting with Matthiessen in California, a Lakota Sioux man reports rumors of the apocalypse, "when the moon will turn red and the sun will turn blue," and the Lakota will regain their proper place at the center of existence. When Matthiessen arrives at traditional Lakota territory in the Dakotas, he hears that the Big Man was sighted not long previously at a place called Little Eagle. Some people recognized the creature as a chthonic being, formerly buried by a flood and now reemerged, perhaps because of uranium mining and its pollution. Others who were given over to drink were frightened by the apparition and shot at the Big Man, not knowing what they did. At Pine Ridge, where Matthiessen's Indian initiation, as it were, ends, the Big Man's reappearance is seen as a response to the incarceration of Peltier. Thereafter, with one exception, the creature is not mentioned again and a long political narrative consumes the book. Matthiessen notes that the night before the controversial shoot-out, three Indian teens at the site

heard a large, heavy-footed creature walking on the stones of a creek.

Matthiessen in the late 1980s returned to fiction with his Watson novels, but he continued to research Bigfoot on the side. He liked to vacation in the West in the summertime and ramble about. He'd go fly fishing in Montana with the novelist Jim Harrison. At an ecology institute in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Matthiessen met John Mioczynski, a free-spirited musician, wilderness guide, and big-game biologist. They cautiously traded accounts of their personal brushes with Bigfoot. Mioczynski, who was twenty years Matthiessen's junior, found much to admire in the writer. "He was such a deep thinker," Mioczynski said. "I appreciated his insights on Zen and meditation. He was so good at explaining the reality of that. I consider him a teacher and mentor."

Mioczynski worked part time on a university ethnography project collecting legends and stories from Native Americans. He would bring Matthiessen along on trips to the reservations, and they'd ask the elders about the Big Man. A tale they heard at the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming deeply intrigued the two investigators. Some time back a young woman on the reservation claimed to have been abducted and raped by a big hairy man. When the woman became pregnant, the tribe sent her away to Jemez Pueblo, a reservation of another tribe in New Mexico. There she gave birth to a boy who turned out to be not normal. He was sickly but also muscular. "He was not good to look at," said Mioczynski, "what you used to a call a retarded child. At thirteen or fourteen years old he died." Reportedly the boy was buried in a mission graveyard on the pueblo, and his mother returned to her tribe in Wyoming. A mystery turned on the boy's grave, which had been lost or moved – what had happened to it? Mioczynski would telephone Matthiessen at his home on eastern Long Island with updates on this and other Bigfoot puzzles.

Entering his sixties, Matthiessen was preoccupied with the Watson novels. Over the course of two decades he published three and then pulled them apart and consolidated them in a fourth, the National Book Award–winning *Shadow Country*. Although during these years he traveled to research books about tigers and cranes, his best nonfiction work was behind him. The Bigfoot notes and drafts simmered on the back burner, neither fiction nor

nonfiction. He was simply unsure. He would put himself on the line for an environmental or political cause and incur a risk, he allowed, to his literary reputation, but he would not be called a crackpot or dupe. Once at a small dinner of friends in the Hamptons, a guest told a story about seeing a green light from a UFO, which he had decided upon reflection to be a laser. The man was astonished when Matthiessen spoke up and declared that he had once seen a sasquatch run across the road into the trees. Matthiessen's wife (he had remarried) tried to stop him from giving the details, but "he was determined to do so," the guest said. The creature had jumped a tangle of stumps and logs with the ease of a deer.

Matthiessen always felt on firmer ground with the yeti, or *mehti*, as he now called it, a better transliteration. In May 1992, he returned to remote Nepal at the invitation of the photographer Thomas Laird. Instead of walking, the party went by air and horseback into the wild region of Lo, where Laird took pictures of brightly clad villagers, barren landscapes, and little-known Buddhist monasteries. Matthiessen provided the text for a coffee-table book, *East of Lo Monthang*, published by Shambhala/Timeless Books. In it, on a fourteen-thousand-foot-high plateau, my intrepid uncle savors a bit of bread and sweetened tea, "and in this way, keeping my own counsel, I celebrate my wonderful luck at finding myself on this eminence in the clear mountain air of Central Asia and the good fortune that permits me to lead such a wayward life. I am sixty-five years old this very day."

Alert to the possibility of yetis, Matthiessen and his companion are told by their Sherpa porters that pastoralists have come across tracks in a nearby gorge. Matthiessen records that "numbers of such prints had been made near the salt lick a few days earlier by a *mehti*—the problematic creature derided in the West as the yeti, or Abominable Snowman." Laird and Matthiessen demand to be taken there, the photographer more hotly than the writer, because Laird "had been grievously afflicted by the *mehti* fever that has struck down many a Himalayan traveller before him, myself included." One of the tracks "had a strange narrow heel and also a pronounced line behind the ball of the foot, just at the arch, which distinguished it at once from *Homo sapiens*." There were marks of primate toes in the hard sand. The prints were small, about the

size of the foot of a small man, but then yetis were held to be not nearly as large as sasquatches.

A photo of the best track was duly reproduced in the book, along with credulous commentary. Unfortunately, when the photo was presented to mammalogists in New York, they agreed that the footprint was a bear's. Yes, it was unusual for a Himalayan brown bear to roam that high. A twist of reddish-brown hair that the Sherpas averred had belonged to the *mehti* turned out to be horsehair. Just before the book went to press, Matthiessen inserted a block of extra text, in bold type, reporting the findings and withdrawing his statements about the tracks in the gorge.

John Mioczynski became friends with Jeffrey Meldrum, a professor at Idaho State University. Meldrum, who teaches anthropology and anatomy at the Pocatello campus, has been fascinated with Bigfoot since his teens, when he saw the Patterson-Gimlin film in a theater. Meldrum had good credentials as a researcher of bipedalism in fossil hominin species. Later he began to publish papers on putative bipedal characteristics of Bigfoot. Like Mioczynski and Matthiessen, Meldrum had had an encounter in the woods with an animal he believed to be a sasquatch. "It's not a matter of *belief*," he said to me. "I've had it brush against my tent. I'm convinced on the basis of the evidence, which admittedly is short of a holotype [a definitive specimen]. But I have over 300 footprint casts in my lab. They are biomechanically sound. So it goes beyond belief."

In 2005 Meldrum was preparing to publish a book, *Sasquatch: Legend Meets Science,* with an introduction by George Schaller. Mioczynski suggested that Meldrum send the galleys to Matthiessen, who was impressed, and later wrote a glowing blurb for the paperback. Then Meldrum invited Matthiessen to join him that summer in the Cascade range in Washington State. A documentary about Bigfoot was being filmed in conjunction with the book. Meldrum, Mioczynski, and others planned to poke around the Suiattle River drainage, because it was the area of a recent possible sighting. Making camp at the end of a Forest Service road, Meldrum and his team installed motion-sensitive cameras along game trails. They went out on daily forays to search for tracks.

Matthiessen was in excellent shape for a seventy-eight-year-

old, but he found it difficult at times to keep up. The men clambered over logs and pushed through brush. At one obstacle the younger guys physically pulled him up. "Don't get old," Matthiessen said ruefully. "Just don't do it."

No sasquatch tracks were found; nothing was captured on the trail cameras except familiar animals. After about ten days Meldrum removed the cameras, and everyone in the party left but Matthiessen, Mioczynski, and a third fellow named Rick Noll.

The three went to bed. In the morning Matthiessen noticed that a large rock near the tents appeared to have been moved. It had been stood on its end, like some sort of sign, and what's more a footprint and suggestions of additional prints were nearby. Said Mioczynski: "We walked around trying to figure out how it could have been faked. How could a bear have positioned that rock? Did someone hoax us? We didn't find any vehicle tracks. It would have been a long walk in along the road. But we didn't say definitely it was Bigfoot."

Meldrum and Matthiessen kept in touch. When he turned eighty, Matthiessen seems to have decided to speak openly about his Bigfoot and yeti researches. In 2007 he gave a talk on the Pocatello campus. The title was "A Naturalist's Perspective on the Wild Man," and it covered the zoology of relic hominoid species, on the one hand, and Bigfoot stories and indigenous legends, on the other. Matthiessen gave another talk the next day before the tribal council at the nearby Fort Hall (Shoshone-Bannock) Reservation. When a gray-haired woman in the audience angrily interrupted, accusing him of coming to steal their stories, Matthiessen gently turned the tables. He was there to give them *back* their traditions, he maintained. He won the crowd over, and after the talk gleaned more information about the Big Man.

In 2009 he was the keynote speaker at the Texas Bigfoot Conference in the city of Tyler. "Peter Matthiessen is finally coming out in full public view with the Bigfoot beliefs I always suspected he held," enthused a Bigfoot buff in anticipation. A journalist for the *Texas Monthly* approached him for an interview. "Contemplating whether to write a book on the subject, Matthiessen paused to muse on Bigfoot and his worldwide brethren. 'People have a need for story and myth,' Matthiessen said. 'Most scientists are very skeptical. And they should be. But they shouldn't have a

completely closed mind about it. Remember the coelacanth, a so-called fossil fish? It was believed to be 200,000 years extinct and then turned up 20 years ago off the Madagascar coast. I saw some myself in a tank while visiting the Comoros Islands. So, you know, stranger things have happened than Bigfoot. I'm all for mystery,' he said. 'I think it's going to be a very dull world when there's no more mystery at all.'"

Now and then Jeff Meldrum and John Mioczynski pressed him, eager to know what his Bigfoot book would say. Was it a novel? When would it come out? But Matthiessen would not commit. He would only smile, and say to his two friends that he was thinking about it.

He came near to revealing his ideas in a short essay for a volume about adventure travel, *Better Than Fiction: True Travel Tales from Great Fiction Writers* (2012). In the summer of 2009, aged eighty-two, he and a boatman are about to launch a raft into a dangerous chute on a Montana river. Having volunteered to go, Matthiessen broods: "To refuse out of flimsiness and old-timer timidity what might well be my last shot at a real adventure was to face the fact that a man I used to know was gone for good." He jokes to friends on the bank that they shouldn't worry because his best work is behind him. "We laughed, of course, but there was truth in this. I was having great trouble finding the right voice for a difficult novel-in-progress, and also with a second one I sometimes fiddled with when frustrations with the first became intolerable."

The first novel Matthiessen mentions must be *In Paradise,* an uncharacteristic work that takes place in modern-day Auschwitz. The book was published in April 2014, around the time he died of leukemia. The second difficult novel must have been about Bigfoot, and may yet emerge from his papers.

In 1956, his first marriage on the rocks, a shotgun in the trunk of his car, young Peter Matthiessen took off from Long Island on a lengthy tour of America's wild places. The book that ensued was *Wildlife in America* (1959), his first work of nonfiction. It contains no sasquatches and has not much to say about Native Americans. Drawing upon historical and scientific publications, and information gathered from government biologists and park rangers, the book is a "study of extinct and vanishing wildlife." The author's

tone is mournful. The condor, grizzly bear, jaguar, bald eagle, passenger pigeon, crocodile, sturgeon, great auk, and many others are either going or gone. The fact that some of these creatures have, with help, regained some of their numbers would not have made Matthiessen any more optimistic about the state of the earth today.

Tenderly he tells about the ivory-billed woodpecker, a large and beautiful bird of "the dark cypress silences of southern swamplands." Last seen in the 1940s, the ivory-billed woodpecker "has vanished quietly," because it was overly dependent on a disappearing habitat containing large, recently dead trees. Scattered reports by people claiming to have seen the bird are "problematical, at best."

The story of the ivory-bill is the closest thing in American biology to the saga of Bigfoot. Was the beautiful bird with the flaming red crest and "loud, wild cry" truly extinct? Since *Wildlife in America* was published, reputed sightings of the woodpecker have never entirely ceased, while proof that it still lives has never solidified. Small-scale expeditions are forever being made. Just as a bear, standing on its hind legs, may be mistaken for a large, hairy primate, the rather common pileated woodpecker is often confused with the ivory-bill. I remember talking with Peter about the lost woodpecker one evening in the fall of 2005. I realize now that he had just come back from an encounter, possibly, with a sasquatch – the incident of the upturned rock.

A team of ornithologists had made a short, jumpy video in an Arkansas swamp of what they claimed in the journal *Science* to be an ivory-billed woodpecker. Another group of scientists, equally credentialed, had disputed the sighting, saying the bird was the pileated species. In our discussion Peter took the side of the ivory-bill, and I the side of the skeptics. It wasn't exactly an argument, but I remember his irritation with his science-writer nephew, who parried everything he said. He shook his head and glared. Aldo Leopold described an old wolf he had shot as having died with a "fierce green fire" in her eyes. I saw Sasquatch's embers in Peter Matthiessen's eyes that night. Leopold continues, "I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain."